



U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

STATEMENT

OF

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REGARDING A HEARING ON

“THE PRESIDENT’S FY 2006 BUDGET REQUEST”

BEFORE THE

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

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Good morning Chairman Cochran and Ranking Member Byrd and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Eduardo Aguirre and I have the honor of serving as the first Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, within the Department of Homeland Security.

We are a welcoming nation, and the hard work and patriotism of our immigrants has made our Nation prosperous. Since USCIS was established in March of 2003, we have made tremendous progress, which I will share with you today, to deliver the President's vision of "welcoming immigrants with open arms....not endless lines." It is my sincere belief that the progress we have made in the past year is not an anomaly, but rather a strong foundation and a new baseline from which to grow.

USCIS will continue to secure America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system. Our vision is to strengthen America's future by becoming a customer-focused innovator of benefits processing, a catalyst for citizenship education, instruction and outreach, a recognized and credible source of useful information, and a leading contributor to the security of the United States.

USCIS has established three core values: integrity, respect, and ingenuity. We shall always strive for the highest level of integrity in our dealings with our customers, our fellow employees, and the citizens of the United States. We will also demonstrate respect in all our actions to ensure that everyone we affect will be treated with dignity and courtesy regardless of the outcome of the decision. And we will also use ingenuity, resourcefulness, creativity, and sound management principles to strive for world-class results.

USCIS is one of the largest fee-funded agencies in the Federal government – charging fees for a variety of immigration benefits from individuals seeking to enter, reside, or work in the United States. Therefore, the actual cash flow for our business operations, including a network of 250 local offices, Application Support Centers, Service Centers, Asylum Offices, National Customer Service Call (NCSC) Centers, Forms Centers, and Internet portals, varies from year to year with the number of immigration benefit applications received.

In any typical work day, our workforce of 15,000 (one-third of whom are contractors) will:

- Conduct 140,000 national security background checks.
- Receive 100,000 hits to our Internet website (www.uscis.gov).
- Answer phone inquiries from 80,000 callers at four National Customer Service Centers.
- Process 30,000 applications for an immigration benefit.
- Answer in-person inquiries from 25,000 visitors to information counters at 92 local offices.
- Issue 7,000 green cards.
- Capture 8,000 sets of fingerprints at 130 Application Support Centers.
- Welcome 3,000 new citizens.
- Welcome 3,000 new permanent residents.
- Welcome nearly 200 refugees from around the world.
- Help American parents adopt nearly 80 foreign-born orphans.
- Process the naturalization application of 50 individuals serving in the U.S. military.
- Grant asylum to 80 individuals already in the United States.

USCIS has established three priorities: (1) enhancing national security, (2) eliminating the immigration benefit application backlog, and (3) improving customer service. In our second year of operations, we have successfully reduced the backlog to 1.5 million cases (down from a high of 3.8 million cases in January 2004), expanded electronic filing to support 50% of the total volume of benefit applications, expanded InfoPass (a USCIS Web-based system that enables the public to go online to schedule appointments), expanded phone services to allow round-the-clock

access via automated means, expanded access to customers' case status information via the USCIS website, and created the Fraud Detection and National Security Unit to work closely with the appropriate law enforcement entities in responding to concerns relating to aliens who may pose a threat to national security or public safety.

The President's FY 2006 budget will allow us to build upon the progress we have made in the past year. The budget includes a total for USCIS of \$1.854 billion, \$80 million in appropriated funds and \$1.774 billion in fees. The FY 2006 budget will allow USCIS to process over 7 million immigration benefit applications and is the final year of the President's five-year plan to achieve a six-month cycle time standard or less for all immigration benefit applications at every USCIS office, including a total of \$100 million to support backlog elimination efforts as well as improvements in application processing. This brings the five-year total for this aggressive initiative to \$560 million.

The USCIS FY 2006 budget also includes two important fee-related legislative proposals. One proposal involves the removal of a statutory cap on the Temporary Protected Status processing fee. This proposal will allow the fee to be adjusted above the current \$50 to recover full costs, subject to a fee review, similar to the way other immigration benefit application fees are currently set. The other proposal is a customer service enhancement that authorizes expansion of premium processing service to non-employment based applications and petitions. DHS is currently authorized to collect a \$1,000 premium processing fee, in addition to the normal processing fee, for employment-based applications and petitions. This proposal would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security to set the premium processing fee for certain non employment-based applications and petitions, such as travel documents, advance parole, employment authorization, re-entry permits, fiancé adjudications etc., to not exceed \$1,000, and in excess of \$1,000 for the investor visa (EB-5) program.

Eliminating the Backlog

Although we are on track to achieve the President's backlog elimination mandate, we fully realize that funding alone will not enable us to achieve this goal. As Will Rogers so simply stated, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." Thus, we have taken, and continue to take, a hard look at the way we currently conduct our business. This commitment is not just one of words, but one of action. Since my appointment and confirmation as Director of USCIS, I have worked closely with the leaders in USCIS to continually review our processes, identify opportunities for streamlining and further improvement, and to implement meaningful change. Let me assure you that USCIS will never compromise national security in an effort to increase productivity.

In the past year, USCIS forwarded to the Congress a Backlog Elimination Plan that outlines the roadmap to achieve the President's mandate. We will continue to provide the Congress with quarterly progress reports on our Backlog Elimination status and achievements.

FY 2004 was truly an outstanding year for USCIS. USCIS increased overall completions by 17% over the FY 2003 volume and met and/or exceeded cycle time targets in fifteen of sixteen major form types. In addition, USCIS completed a total of 109,000 asylum cases in FY 2004, representing a 20% increase in productivity from the previous fiscal year, when it completed 91,000. USCIS also worked steadily with its refugee program partners to successfully meet refugee admissions levels designated by the President while ensuring that the integrity and security of the program remained intact. USCIS officers conducted refugee status interviews in 50 countries around the world and interviewed more than 70,000 refugee applicants of at least 65 different nationalities. As a result of these efforts, almost 53,000 refugees were admitted to the United States during FY 2004, an 86% increase over the previous year's admissions.

USCIS will increase its focus on Information Technology through an enterprise-wide transformation effort to ensure that long-term backlog elimination goals are sustained, customer service is improved, fraud detection and national security capabilities are enhanced, and a technology environment is deployed to support new processes and workflow aligned with the

DHS mission and the Presidential mandate for eGov standards. USCIS is currently undergoing an infrastructure upgrade of its District and Service Center operations, upgrading its web presence environment, and developing a new integrated case management system to ultimately operate in a paperless adjudication environment.

Ensuring National Security

USCIS understands that ensuring national security and preventing and detecting fraud are essential elements of its mission. As such, our newly established Fraud Detection and National Security Unit (FDNS) developed a joint anti-fraud strategy with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), hired and trained nearly 100 anti-fraud officers, and is in the midst of implementing an anti-fraud initiative throughout the United States. The FDNS is also leading the enhancement of USCIS' background check process, which is aimed at identifying applicants, beneficiaries, and petitioners who pose a threat to national security and public safety prior to granting them immigration benefits. The FDNS is also leading USCIS' information sharing initiative with key law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

The establishment of a Refugee Corps with an expanded management support structure will provide a strong and effective overseas refugee processing program that will more efficiently identify inadmissible persons and those who are of national security interest without compromising the U.S. Refugee Program's (USRP's) humanitarian objectives. A Refugee Corps will ensure responsiveness to USRP commitments and goals, while greatly reducing the need to draw on scarce domestic program resources. It will also ensure the quality and consistency of refugee adjudications and improve the detection of refugee application fraud and the identification of security concerns relating to refugee admissions.

USCIS also implemented the Safe Third Country Agreement on Asylum with Canada to help strengthen public confidence in the integrity of the immigration system and ensure that all asylum seekers will be heard, that they will receive procedural safeguards, and that they not be removed until either Canada or the United States has made a determination on the protection claim, in accordance with national laws implementing treaty obligations.

Improving Customer Service

The Office of Citizenship continues to focus on providing information to immigrants at two key points in their journey towards citizenship: when they first become Permanent Residents and later when they are ready and eligible to begin the formal naturalization process. In the past year, the Office of Citizenship introduced an orientation guide entitled "Welcome to the United States: A Guide for New Immigrants." The guide, which will be available in 10 languages in FY 2005, contains practical information to help immigrants get started in the United States, and provides information to assist immigrants in the civic integration process. The Office of Citizenship also held a series of focus groups across the United States during the spring of 2004 to hear directly from local communities about their strengths, gaps, and needs in the areas of immigrant integration and citizenship preparation. The results of these focus group discussions were published in a report called "Helping Immigrants Become New Americans: Communities Discuss the Issues."

Additionally, we have been examining the standard of knowledge in the current citizenship test to ensure that prospective and new citizens know not only the facts of our nation's history, but also the ideals that have shaped that history. We also are working to standardize testing procedures in an effort to ensure equitable and more uniform results. Currently, a candidate in Los Angeles is, in all likelihood, not tested the same way or asked the same questions as a candidate taking the same exam on the same day in Boston.

We do not want to make the test more difficult. We do not want to make it less difficult. We want to make it more meaningful in a way that does not have an adverse impact on any particular group of applicants. Therefore, we will carefully pilot test the revised English, history, and government tests before implementing them. And we will consult with our stakeholders to solicit

their input, as we have done throughout the process. Once the test development is done, the Office of Citizenship will coordinate the creation of educational materials to complement this important initiative.

Our plan is to begin implementing the new test and testing process in 2007. Given the importance of the ultimate benefit for those tested - U.S. citizenship - this process is not one that can or should be rushed. We are committed to improving the current process and to improving it in the right way.

In our commitment to modernize and enhance the delivery of immigration services, InfoPass was launched in Miami in June of 2003. InfoPass is a free, easy and convenient alternative to waiting in line. It allows USCIS customers to go on-line and use an Internet-based system to make an appointment to speak with an Immigration Information Officer at a time that is convenient for the customer. InfoPass is now available for customers at all USCIS District and sub offices.

Other conveniences available on www.uscis.gov include "E-Filing" for certain immigration applications, including the renewal and replacement of "green cards," (Form I-90). E-Filing provides a quick, easy and convenient way for customers to complete, submit, and pay fees for petitions and applications at any time, from any computer with Internet access. As a further time saver, the USCIS Web site is now set up to accept credit cards for the payment of application fees. To date, USCIS has received more than 250,000 applications through its E-Filing system. E-Filing now supports form types that account for 50% of the total volume of benefits applications USCIS receives annually. During FY 2005, USCIS plans to combine E-Filing with the Lockbox program to further streamline our internal processes. E-Filing will also play a key supporting role in implementing Premium Processing for additional form types; the newly enacted H1-B/L-1 Visa Reform Acts; and an electronic adjudication initiative.

Additionally, the public is encouraged to use the Internet to check the status of applications filed with any of USCIS' Service Centers. Our Case Status Service Online, available in English and Spanish, allows customers who have a receipt number for an application or petition filed at a USCIS Service Center to check the status of their pending case online through the USCIS website (USCIS.gov), or by calling the toll-free telephone number of our National Customer Service Center. The Case Status Online system offers customers the option of establishing a portfolio of up to 100 cases that can be checked through a single login 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Customers can also elect to have USCIS automatically send an email informing them of any change in status of a pending case.

In the past year, USCIS has responded to over 11,000,000 queries for verification of immigration status. USCIS provides immigration and employment authorization status information to over 126,000 government and private sector users. By providing the best possible verification services to thousands of agencies and employers, USCIS saves the Government money by ensuring that only eligible aliens receive public benefits. In addition, an employment verification pilot program authorized in 1996 and reauthorized in 2004, helps to ensure that jobs are available only to workers authorized to accept employment in the United States.

As you are aware, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 authorized overseas military naturalizations. In the past year, USCIS has naturalized more than 7,000 military service members both in the U.S. and overseas, and posthumously naturalized 39 service members who died in service to the United States.

Finally, USCIS committed itself to the global effort to recover from the earthquake and tsunami by announcing temporary relief measures for those individuals who are unable to return to their home country due to the destruction and humanitarian crisis in Southeast Asia. USCIS is expediting the processing of certain immigration benefit applications, including requests for advance parole and relative petitions for minor children from the affected areas. USCIS also is more readily approving applications from visitors from the tsunami-affected countries who requested a change or extension of their nonimmigrant status.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I thank you for the invitation to testify before this committee and I would be happy to answer any questions.